

Two Poets of the Peasantry

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priest whom he meets, indeed, with
 professional jealousy
 laughs at such home-made salvation; so that
 poor Piers
 tears up his pardon in despair and the
 dreamer wakes, full
 of perplexity. Yet Truth, he cannot but
 believe, spoke
 truly after all. Goodness remains what
 matters; and his
 own charity spreads out beyond the
 barriers of the
 Church, with a tolerance rare in his day, to
 embrace, if it
 may be, even Jews and Saracens and noble
 pagans like
 Trajan, whose just dealing according to the
 legend (again

¹ ¹ /• \ ¹¹ * o
 we are reminded of Dante) saved him from
 among the
 lost, though unbaptized. Indeed the poet's
 troubled sense
 of justice leads him into the very doubts he
 so angrily
 attacks the rich for indulging at dessert
 —'why should
 Aristotle and Solomon be 'Y^ampned" for
 all their wis-
 dom, while evil-doers like David, Mary
 Magdalene, St.
 Paul, or a thief even, are given a chance to
 repent and
 redeem themselves?' He cannot understand
 it at all. His
 charity in its anxious tenderness will even
 cheat and
 quibble like Portia's, *lustus vix salvabitur*
 he twists to
 mean, not 'hardly shall the just be saved',
 but 'the just
shall be saved, though it *may* be difficult'.
 For a moment
 this grey face even grows radiant, as he
 dreams of Palm
 Sunday and how

Olde luwes of Jerusalem * for loye thei
 songen.

Yet always the clouds return; till at the

end the hosts
of Antichrist close in on the Fortress of Unity,
Contricioun
is stupefied by the treachery of a flattering
friar, and
Conscience left to trudge alone across the
world in search
of Piers Plowman—in how anguished and
endless a
search, the Reformation was to find.

Almost always this sadness returns to the poet,
time he awakes from his dream to reality—
whether
Cornhill, dunking how little he is
esteemed, how little
indeed he deserves to be; or 'meteleees and
moneleees on